DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 419 FL 016 899

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TITLE Building Proficiency: Activities for the Four Skills.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 23p.; In: Birckbichler, Diane W., Ed. Proficiency, Policy, and Professionalism in Foreign Language Education. Selected Papers from the 1987 Central States Conference; see FL 016 895.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; Classroom Communication; Communicative Competence (Languages); *Interpersonal Communication; *Language Proficiency; *Language Skills; *Relevance (Education); Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; Student Motivation; *Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

The concept of language proficiency and the process of language skill development are discussed, and classroom activities that build proficiency in the four language skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are described. General considerations in using the activities are noted. Skill development activities for all skill areas have some common characteristics: relevant vocabulary, language and situations that are meaningful to the students, real communication, practice of skills needed in the real world, a direct connection between the activity and the skill being learned, and motivational power. A description of six types of activities that help students develop communicative skills in the four skill areas is presented. (MSE)

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# Building Proficiency: Activities for the Four Skills

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## What Is Proficiency?

Proficiency appears to be the bandwagon of the 1980s, but it is and should be much more than that. Since the publication of the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines* in 1982 (2) and the 1986 revised *Guidelines* (1), the focus of second-language teaching has been shifting toward the concept of language as a functional skill. Although the *Guidelines* provide us with descriptions of learner behaviors at various stages of proficiency in each of the four skills, they do not tell us how to achieve our proficiency goals. In order to translate the proficiency guidelines into classroom practice, it is first necessary to understand what the idea of proficiency implies.

The general dictionary definition of proficiency is "performing . . . with expert correctness and facility" (4). To have proficiency implies, therefore, that considerable skills in a given field have been developed. Within the foreign language field, however, the concept of proficiency stresses the developing stages of proficiency rather than the expert final product. To gain a perspective, one can consider the probability that a Concorde pilot first became proficient in flying a Piper Cub, and a

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Meryl Streep probably performed proficiently in a grade-school play. Nevertheless, the language teaching profession must remember to use the term *proficiency* with care and with adequate definitions, keeping the more generic definition in mind. With this caveat noted, then, language proficiency can be defined as the student's language performance. More specifically, proficiency refers to an individual's relative ability to function appropriately in the target language in specific communicative circumstances (e.g., language for travel, career goals, personal contacts with native speakers).

The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* describe typical performance characteristics in each of the four skills using a scale that ranges from no language ability to the language ability of an educated native speaker. Between these extremes, there are ten levels and subdivisions: Novice-Low, Novice-Mid, Novice-High, Intermediate-Low, Intermediate-Mid, Intermediate-High, Advanced, Advanced-Plus, Superior, and Distinguished (1). Also implied in the *Guidelines* is that a learner's performance may vary at different points in time and may depend upon such factors as the situation, the skill used, or the specific function(s) in question. A learner may, for example, function at the Novice-Mid level in speaking and writing, at the Novice-High level in listening, and at the Intermediate-Low level in reading.

It is important that educators remember that the levels of the ACTFL Proficiency scale are meant for assessment and that they are neither static (such as I.Q. measures) nor predictive (such as aptitude). Even the very best beginning high school students will probably not finish the year at the Novice level, and almost all of the advanced students in the fourth or fifth year class, even those with excellent averages, will probably remain at the Novice or Intermediate level (Omaggio, 19, p. 19). Reaching another level (from Intermediate-Low to Intermediate-Mid, for example) should be used positively to denote a student's progress rather than compare the student's limited language to that of the educated native speaker. Unrealistic expectations of the degree of proficiency possible at any level are a major factor in the foreign language dropout rate. Students (and some of their teachers) might believe, for example, that they are failures because they are still Novices after two years of study, even though becoming a Novice-High

may be an outstanding achievement. Foreign language teachers, especially at the secondary level, must be sure that administrators and the community understand what levels of proficiency can be attained realistically, and they must also understand that proficiency refers to a multilevel range of expertise. An accurate and complete picture of the concept of proficiency will, therefore, allow teachers, administrators, and parents to have realistic expectations about sequences of language study.

It is also important to note that the scale is skill-based rather than knowledge-based, whereas achievement testing in the foreign language typically requires students to demonstrate knowledge of material covered in a given chapter or course. A student's class performance may reveal, for example, a substantial understanding of the language and the culture, yet the student's overall language proficiency in an authentic communicative exchange may be substantially different.

## How Do Students Develop Language Skills?

In order to understand foreign language skill development some assumptions about the context within which these processes occur need to be examined. Heilenman and Kaplan (10) formulated nine premises upon which a proficiency-based curriculum is based, three of which are important in developing proficiency-oriented activities. One of these premises states (p. 58) that "proficiency in a foreign language is attained through a proficiency-based curriculum." Heilenman and Kaplan go on to explain that

> learning a certain number of adjectives along with their morphological changes does not translate directly into being able to describe, just as learning the various uses and forms of the subjunctive is not the same thing as being able to defend one's opinions and state one's feelings.

Another premise states (p. 59) that "the demonstration of proficiency in a foreign language requires the use of the language," and the authors also believe that

> it cannot be said too often that the difference between levels of proficiency as defined by the proficiency guidelines is not one of knowledge in terms of

> achievement tests, but one of ability to use the language in less structured and more global settings.

Therefore, classroom processes and activities used to develop language proficiency are not simply reorganized grammar-based activities, but rather activities meant to develop a functional skill or to function within a realistic context.

Another premise states (p. 62) that "a proficiency-based curriculum is eclectic. It starts with outcomes; it does not prescribe practices," which, according to Heilenman and Kaplan, suggests

> a rationally-based curriculum in which instructors pick and choose among the available methods, approaches, and techniques on the basis of their effectiveness at each given level.

Evidence is beginning to emerge that there may be substantial differences in the approaches and techniques that are effective at the various levels. Higgs and Clifford (11, p. 69), for example, cite data from the Interagency Language Roundtable showing the relative contributions to proficiency at various levels of the different subskills: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, fluency, and sociolinguistic factors. Vocabulary, for example, a heavily content-oriented subskill, plays a relatively more substantial role at the Novice Level than at the Advanced Level. Grammar skill, on the other hand, becomes increasingly important as the student progresses toward more advanced levels. Another difference results from the short attention span of today's adolescents, which suggests limited use of sustained activities with younger language learners.

In order for language learners to improve their proficiency in a classroom setting, the class must be based on the assumptions of a proficiency-based curriculum, realistic opportunities to use the skill, and carefully chosen eclectic approaches and techniques. Within this context, the processes or learning stages through which learners improve their proficiency levels can be discussed.

## How Do Learners Become Proficient?

Psychologists Dreyfus and Dreyfus (Trotter, 31) studied expertise

in airline pilots, chess players, automobile drivers, and second-language masters and isolated five stages of skill development common to all learners and the types of thinking involved at each stage. These learning stages are Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent Learner, Proficient Learner, and Expert.

Novices learn to recognize objective facts and figures relevant to the skill and rules for deciding how to act on the facts and figures. The basic rules ignore context, and novices have very little global understanding of tasks.

Advanced beginners usually gain experience in real situations and their skills have improved to a marginally acceptable level. Advanced beginners are learning to recognize and operate on previously defined facts and apply more sophisticated rules to context-free and situational instances.

Competent learners use planning in simplifying and organizing situations. They may or may not choose to follow rules and procedures, and the outcome (success or failure) of a plan is often clearly remembered—an important aspect of future expertise.

Proficient learners follow a rapid, fluent style made possible by the ability to recognize important task elements and ignore irrelevant aspects. This "holistic similarity recognition" is triggered by memories of similar past experiences. Although they can think analytically, proficient learners are more intuitive.

Experts do not need to make decisions or apply rules. Skill has become ingrained to the point that the expert is unaware of it. Again, holistic similarity recognition results in expert performance.

It is interesting to note the similarities of these learning stages to the levels of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, although it is important to note that the guidelines define a *product* and the learning stages of Dreyfus and Dreyfus define *process*. They are, therefore, not necessarily concurrent steps. A few students, for example, may reach the Expert stage of learning the skills within the Novice range of the ACTFL scale. These are students who frequently and meaningfully use (without making decisions or applying rules) many of the memorized formulas and the common rejoinders of the language.

## Proficiency-Oriented Activities: General Considerations

The next sections of this article will present activities that help develop the proficiency of students in the four skill areas: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Although guidelines and suggestions are provided, it is still the teacher who knows best his or her capabilities, the abilities of students, and any factors in a class, school, and community that influence educational practice. Decisions about how and when to use these and similar activities is the teacher's choice; what does not seem debatable is that these activities do indeed promote the development of the student's language proficiency.

In addition, the activities focus generally on communicative activities. Paulston and Selekman (20) identified four types of language activities: mechanical, meaningful, communicative, and interactive. To help students develop language proficiency, classroom activities should generally be of the meaningful type. Activities of the communicative type are more advantageous, especially because of the student's personal involvement; interactive activities have the benefit of giving students more realistic experiences in using the language.

The question of realism in the language classroom has become an increasingly important consideration in recent years. Galloway suggests (8, p. 50) that "authentic tasks are those which invite the learner to do what would be done, in much the way it would be done, by native users of the language." Swaffar (29) suggests that in the foreign language classroom authenticity can be defined as a task whose objective is the transmission of meaning and one that has an authentic communicative goal. Thus, the term "real" (Wattenmaker and Wilson, 32) communication again becomes important and is defined in terms of the transmission of messages—usually, but not always or necessarily, with authentic materials, in authentic situations, or with authentic tasks. It is therefore the communicative task that determines whether or not authentic materials and tasks are used. In fact, such materials should be used whenever and wherever possible to do so without causing undue frustration to the teacher or the student. For example, because of the lack of available authentic materials, teachers who have limited time available cannot easily find such materials or prepare the necessary activities that accompany them. Students, especially at the beginning levels in high

school, are often intimidated by authentic texts, even if they can complete the tasks that are based on them.

## Listening Proficiency

Belasco (6) maintains that in order to become proficient listeners, learners must spend time listening to the types of materials that native speakers listen to, i.e., practical or functional listening. Many teachers feel that students will "pick up" listening comprehension on their own, but decades of producing nonproficient listeners in the classroom have shown that casual approaches to listening do not necessarily develop that skill. The audiotapes of the past have rarely included the types of exercises relevant to developing listening proficiency, and commercially prepared videotapes are just beginning to reach the market. Teachers, therefore, usually have to find, edit, or create their own materials in order to teach listening skills in the classroom. Realistic materials that are based on familiar topics are best for beginners, who often become frustrated and lose the message when listening to unedited authentic materials. Thus, contrived materials can be supplemented with carefully chosen or edited authentic materials. Relevant listening experience might include, for example, radio and television broadcasts, conversations, instructions, music, or speeches.

Long (16) lists characteristics that enable teachers to select appropriate listening materials for beginning language learners:

1. They should include both live and recorded materials. Video, because of its additional visual cues, is an excellent medium for teaching listening skills.
2. The listening passages should have a varied format and length and should feature both dialogue and connected discourse.
3. Topics should be familiar ones.
4. Vocabulary should be mostly familiar, but unknown words and phrases may be included to make activities more realistic. Students should be able to hypothesize the meanings of unknown words and phrases from context. Obviously, comprehension of a passage should not rest on unfamiliar vocabulary that cannot be hypothesized from context.

5. Rate of speech should be nearly normal.
6. Advance organizers (prelistening exercises) should be provided so that students understand what they are to do. In many cases, providing questions in advance is sufficient.
7. Follow-up exercises should test listening comprehension—not speaking, reading, or grammar. Thus, students should be allowed to answer in the native language (12) or with simple one-word answers or short phrases in the target language.

The listening activities described below conform to the guidelines suggested by Long (16); further they develop useful skills necessary for effective listening (e.g., the ability to predict content, to guess from context, to identify key ideas or topics, to understand the gist of a message).

**1. Advertisements.** Advertisements for items, especially those of interest to the student, can provide interesting listening practice. As a prelistening exercise for a sale ad, students can be asked to discuss what information is usually conveyed (dates, location of the store, items that are on sale, price reductions, etc.) They can also generate a list of vocabulary words usually contained in such ads (hurry, sale, bargain, savings, etc.). After having students recall pertinent target language vocabulary that they already know, the teacher can provide additional words that are needed. In order to help guide student listening, general questions can be given in advance (e.g., What is the product? Where is it sold? Why is it a bargain? When is the sale?) to answer as they listen the first time to the ad. More detailed questions can then be asked using formats such as true–false, completion, logical–absurd.

**2. Weather Reports.** As a prelistening activity, ask who listened to the weather report recently and how that report differs from televised weather reports (shorter, usually just the temperature and chance of rain are given). Then give students any information that might help them better understand the weather report. If, for example, weather reports are given for the Southwest states in Spanish, temperatures are given in Fahrenheit; elsewhere Celsius would be used. Students can then provide a summary in English of the weather report or could be asked to correct a script of the weather report that contains misinformation.

**3. Conversations.** Listening to authentic conversations is an activity that both challenges and motivates students. It challenges them to use the vocabulary and grammar they know to understand what is being said, and it motivates them because these conversations represent realistic encounters in the target culture. If students listen, for example, to a conversation in a beauty salon, they could be asked to identify the speakers and how they know each other. After a preliminary activity such as this that requires students to listen for the gist, more detailed information can be solicited. For example, a skeletal outline of the conversation could be given to the students, who fill out the missing information as they listen to the conversation.

## Reading Proficiency

Because of its solitary nature, reading is considered by some learners to be the most pleasurable and least threatening of the basic language skills. In addition, experts (3, 7, 17) tell us that it is the skill that is maintained the longest after second language instruction is discontinued. As Larson and Jones (14) maintain, however, second language reading is a very complex process and bringing learners to desirable levels of proficiency is not an easy task. Many learners begin their study of a second language with very proficient reading skills in their native language, but others may have only minimal abilities. Even learners who are fluent readers in the native language are not always able to transfer those skills readily. Yorio's (33) research points out important differences between reading in the native language and reading in a second language:

1. Nonnative readers' knowledge of the target language is different from native speakers' knowledge.
2. Nonnatives' knowledge of the target language is imperfect, making it difficult for them to recognize comprehension cues.
3. It is difficult for nonnative readers to make associations because they mistake or completely miss pertinent cues.
4. Beginning nonnative readers have short memory spans; they often forget what they have just decoded.
5. Interference from the native language is constant.

In addition to these inherent problems, we must also take note of the cognitive psychologists' emphasis on the importance of meaningfulness and what students already know (Ausubel, 5) in the learning process. In order for learning to take place, the task must be meaningful, that is, students must be able to relate the material to what is already known.

Careful planning is needed to help learners approach reading tasks. Phillips (21) suggests a useful five-stage approach: preteaching/preparation, skimming and scanning, decoding/intensive reading, comprehension check, and transferable/integrating skills. Omaggio (19), following Phillips's approach, offers a selection of instructional techniques to be used at each of the five stages and at various levels of proficiency. Basically, these techniques tap knowledge the learners already possess, help them recognize pertinent cues, understand the gist, test comprehension, and enhance reading skills.

The reading activities in the following section are based on a reading taken from a first-year high school French text (13, p. 240). The selection describes the adventures of Alain Bombard, a young French doctor who believed that hunger and thirst do not always cause the death of shipwreck victims; he felt instead that fear and panic are often responsible. To test his ideas, he spent three months in the Atlantic Ocean on a life raft. Ultimately, his survival justified his ideas.

### *Prereading Strategies*

The purpose of prereading activities is to build and activate students' background knowledge and to motivate students to read. It is important to use a variety of techniques not only to maintain student interest but also to have them approach the reading in a variety of ways.

**Illustrations.** Prior to reading the text, show illustrations or photos that accompany the reading on the screen. Ask questions about the illustration in the target language: Where is the man? Is he alone or with friends? What's he wearing? What is the weather like? Why do you think he is there?

**Titles.** Write the title on the board and discuss its meaning. Ask students to predict what the passage might be about.

**Key Words.** Choose several key words from the text and write them on

the board. Ask students to predict what the story might be about. Another option is to have students write an original composition using those key words. Then, ask them to compare their compositions with the reading passage.

**Theme.** Choose one or two key words that describe the theme of the passage and ask students to brainstorm ideas related to the theme. A student-generated list about fear might include, for example, night, snakes, spiders, crime, etc. Use the student-generated list as an introduction to this passage about fear and courage.

**Vocabulary in Context.** Choose several vocabulary words that are essential to the comprehension of the passage. Write the words in isolation on the board, ask students to give a definition for each, and then show students the same words used in sentences that make the meaning clear from the context. Ask students to revise their definitions, and finally, ask them to verify their definitions with a dictionary. The technique of contextual redefinition (Tierney, et al., 30) will not only help build vocabulary and remind students to look at the context for clues, but it will also help activate background knowledge.

**Specific Purposes.** Before asking students to read the passage, give them one or two specific purposes for reading. Tell them, for example, that the story is about a man who was alone in the Atlantic for three months, and that after reading the passage, they should be able to tell why he set out on his trip.

**Different Points of View.** Ask the students to read the passage from a particular point of view. They might read the story, for example, from the perspective of an inexperienced (or experienced) sailor or from the point of view of Alain's family. Different students might be asked to read the passage from different points of view. Students remember passages differently, depending upon the task set prior to reading.

### *The Reading Process*

At the beginning and intermediate levels most reading passages are short enough to be read in class. After one or two prereading activities, introduce the passage and ask students to read it silently. If students were asked to make predictions about the text, the teacher may want to let them read one or two paragraphs and then ask if their predictions are

accurate or if they need to be revised. In some stories, this process may have to be repeated as the reading progresses because students need to make sure that their predictions are correct before they continue. Students may need to read a passage several times in order to comprehend it fully: first, skimming or scanning, for example; next, decoding or intensive reading; and finally, global comprehension. In order to ensure that students are reading for meaning, give them a different task for each reading.

### *Postreading Activities*

The purpose of postreading activities is to check comprehension and to extend the reading to other language skills. Like the prereading activities, these activities must be varied and interesting. The following are suggestions for follow-up activities.

**Main Idea.** State the main idea. Ask students to find one or two sentences from the passage that tell the main idea.

**New Title.** Ask students to generate possible titles for the passage and then vote on the best one.

**New Perspectives.** Retell the story from another perspective. How might Alain, Jack, Alain's mother, or Alain's wife or girlfriend tell the story?

**Take the Author's Chair.** Ask one student to play the part of Alain, and other students to interview him, asking questions about the trip. Students may elaborate on the story.

**Personalize.** Ask personalized questions. Extend the reading by asking students to relate it to their own lives. Would they want to take such a trip? Why or why not? Do you think Alain was foolish? brave? What kind of adventure would they like to have?

## Oral Proficiency

Proficiency in a foreign language has long been associated with oral skill and this association has grown stronger with the advent of the concept of proficiency as defined by the *Guidelines* and the accompanying idea of a common yardstick or unifying principle. Only recently has the profession begun to deal with proficiency in other skill areas, perhaps

because speaking has long been the greatest concern of teachers and students who often cite it as a primary reason for language study or because the Oral Proficiency Interview was the first measure developed to accompany the *Guidelines*. In addition, this emphasis is a logical extension of communicative competence (Savignon, 24), which also focused largely on oral language use.

Because speaking means different things for different people, it is important to examine what conditions are necessary for communication to take place. Schulz and Bartz mention several factors (25, p. 89): (1) authentic, meaningful life situations, (2) motivation, (3) freedom to use the language and to create and experiment linguistically, (4) a supportive classroom environment where students can speak without fear of ridicule, and (5) rewards for content rather than criticism of errors. In light of these considerations, communicative interaction is difficult to achieve in a conversational group of thirty. Students need to talk in groups of the size that they will most often encounter in real life, and they need to practice talking to the people that they will most often talk to, their peers. Small-group and paired student-centered activities are essential for meeting the conditions necessary for real oral practice to occur. Additionally, interacting in small groups gives students substantially more time for practice since all students practice at once. Finally, small-group interaction provides students with a chance for inherent meaningfulness in communication that may be inhibited in a large-group situation (Snyder and DeSelms, 26).

Based on the aforementioned considerations, the following suggestions are offered for implementing oral proficiency activities in the classroom:

1. If a student has to concentrate on grammar to complete the exercise, it is a grammar exercise, not a communicative exercise.
2. Spoken language differs from written language (Rings, 22). It is not necessary to insist on complete sentences when speaking. Hesitation when speaking is normal.
3. As English teachers will attest, errors occur in one's native language. The focus in speaking activities should be on communication of a message, not correctness. A communicative exercise is not an appropriate format for correcting errors.

4. Students who exchange real information often want to comment on it, but doing so in the target language is beyond their ability. Nevertheless, time on task for students (individual opportunity to practice) is far greater in small groups even though up to one third of the time may be off task (Nerenz and Knop, 18). If this off-task time is limited, consider it a positive rather than negative sign because it means generally that students have reacted to content, not grammar.

Examples of activities to help students develop proficiency in speaking are given below.

### *1. Rejoinders, Responses, Replies, and Retorts*

The purpose of this activity is to help eliminate inhibitions about speaking by giving the student practice in using easy, familiar, and meaningful responses. The activity is especially suitable for beginning levels, but it can also be used at intermediate and advanced levels. Students work in pairs for this activity.

Students take turns making statements (based on prepared list of statements, on pictures, on a reading selection, or on another exercise such as a sentence builder). Partners must reply, at first using an expression from a prepared list, and later, after several experiences with the listed expressions, from memory.

**Examples:**

| Student A gives a *statement* (such as these based on a homework assignment). | Student B selects an appropriate *rejoinder* (from a list on the board or from memory). |
|---|---|
| I have a black dog. | Me too. |
| We live in a yellow house. | Who cares? |
| I like blue cars. | Fantastic! |

### *2. Bad Mood*

This activity provides practice in arguing, giving excuses, denying, etc. It is useful at all levels, but it works especially well when students are already in a bad mood. Students work in pairs. Partners take turns making statements (based on prepared list of statements, on pictures, on a reading selection, or on another exercise such as a sentence builder).

Partners must reply by supplying a sentence in which an antonym is used or in which a comparative or superlative is used.
**Examples:**

| | |
|---|---|
| I like ice cream. | I dislike ice cream. |
| Math is easy. | Math is difficult. |
| Science is difficult. | Math is more difficult. |
| I hate Mondays. | I hate Mondays more than you do. |

### *3. Affirmative!*

This brief interview activity allows students to practice asking questions. It is useful at any level and students work in pairs. One student interviews another, asking yes-no questions on a specific topic or topics. The student must continue to ask questions until a predetermined number of "yes" answers has been given by the other student. The students then exchange roles and the other student conducts the interview. The questions may be spontaneous (especially at upper levels) or may be prepared in advance.

### *4. Unidentified Foreign Objects*

This activity, which gives students practice in paraphrasing and circumlocution skills, is for intermediate and advanced students. Students work in pairs and one student is given a picture of an object for which they do *not* know the vocabulary word (e.g., mittens, encyclopedia, can opener, ivy, magnets, lawnmower). The partner does not see the picture. The student must describe the object in the target language or explain how it can be used until the partner guesses what it is. The partner may ask yes-no questions and may make one guess per turn in English. Gestures are not permitted.

### *5. What Happened First?*

Advanced students work in small groups of approximately four students per group and practice hypothesizing skills during this activity. The activity is for advanced levels. Each student in a group of four receives one picture from a set of four sequential pictures. Students do not show the picture to others in the group. Each student describes his or her picture to the others and then the group must decide which picture

is probably first in the sequence, which is second, which third, and which last.

### *6. Old Standbys*

Other activities to build speaking proficiency are such old favorites as the following:

**Show and Tell.** Students describe an object, a snapshot, a drawing they have done, a fashion show, etc.

**Repeat, Recall, Retell.** Students recall a book, article, play, TV show, or newspaper article that they have seen or read and retell it to the class.

**Guessing Games.** Students try to guess another student's secret, an object that another student is thinking of (and has written down), another student's birthday, favorite color, favorite food, etc.

**Mini-Interviews.** Students question another student on a limited topic, such as his or her family, car, house, school schedule, future plans, and so on.

**Brainstorming.** Students produce as long a list as possible of, for example, excuses, beautiful sights, summer activities, characteristics of a friend, or well-known world events.

**Role Playing.** Students role-play situations or scenarios such as a parent and child deciding on use of the family car; a teacher and student talking about late homework; a brother and sister talking about doing household chores; or an employer and student applicant discussing a job opening and necessary qualifications.

## Writing Proficiency

Two problems arise when foreign language teachers attempt to develop the writing proficiency of their students. First, if *native* language writing proficiency were measured using the ACTFL *Guidelines*, many students would show a rather low proficiency level. Transfer of skills, therefore, may be negligible or nonexistent. In fact, many foreign language teachers feel that, like grammar, writing in the native language may be improved by foreign language study.

Second, knowledge of form (grammar) is most often measured through writing, and, consequently, writing is usually judged by the

quality of the language used rather than the message conveyed. Although teachers spend a great deal of time responding to the mechanics of student writing, research results suggest that "time might be more profitably spent in responding to more important aspects of student writing" (Robb, et al., 23, p. 91), that is, the message.

Larson and Jones (14, pp. 133–34) list five areas in which nonnative writers may need to be proficient: correspondence, providing essential information, completing forms, taking notes, and formal papers. They also believe that writing "deserves to be in fourth place, at least at the Novice and Intermediate levels of instruction" (p. 133). Yet because both grammar and content areas (culture, literature, history, and current events, for example) are commonly tested through writing, developing writing skill takes on added importance in the classroom.

Characteristics of good writing, according to Larson and Jones (14), include the following: (1) a clearly formulated message; (2) sensitivity to style and register; and (3) precise use of the language. These considerations correspond to the ACTFL proficiency components of function, content/context, and accuracy. Classroom teachers also add characteristics such as spelling, neatness, and legibility.

At the novice and intermediate level, student writing assignments tend to be more informal, i.e., reflections of oral communication. As students move toward higher levels of proficiency, they need to complete more formal writing assignments. It is at these higher levels that the differences between writing and speaking become important considerations.[1] For example, in writing, the basic unit of written communication is the sentence and grammatical conventions are more carefully observed. In addition, logical sequence and organization of ideas are more important because verbal and nonverbal feedback is not readily available. More complete information must also be provided because the specific characteristics and limitations of the reader may not be known.

Proficiency-oriented activities used to develop writing skill should go beyond dictation, beyond mechanics, and indeed beyond formal composition simply for the sake of formal composition. The following activities are examples of writing practice that meet these criteria.[2]

### *1. What's in a Face?*

Each student is given a sheet of paper on which there are several faces expressing different emotions. For each face the student describes an incident that might have caused that expression. The student should not mention the emotion specifically. When students have completed their writing, they exchange their descriptions with partners and try to match the partners' descriptions with the correct faces. Follow-up activities such as this emphasize that writing should be done with a reader in mind.

This activity gives students practice in narrative writing and also control of the content and language level. A beginning student, for example, might describe a cause for an emotion that is less elaborate but just as correct as the description of a more advanced student.

### *2. Sound Effects Composition*

The teacher records a series of sound effects that students use to create a story. (Sound-effects recordings can be obtained from many public or college libraries.) Although the teacher should take care to choose sounds that the students will be able to describe, most sound effects are ambiguous enough to allow students many interpretations.

The teacher plays the recording twice, allowing students to take notes. Each sound in the series should either last at least five seconds or be separated from the next sound by a five-second period of silence so that students have time to interpret the sound as well as take notes. If a sound is ambiguous, the teacher should allow students to interpret it rather than tell them what the sound is. An example of a sequence of sounds that has been used with third-year language students is the following: cocktail party, barroom brawl, car driving off, car driving through a rainy city, car door closing, walking on gravel, squeaky door opening and closing, dog barking, shotgun blasts, body falling downstairs, victim groaning, laughter, clock striking twelve, police whistles.

### *3. Focus on Faults*

The teacher gives students a picture presenting a situation in which

there are several flaws, problems, or faults. The teacher sets up a premise that requires students to write a critique of the place, situation, or incident. Using the picture in Figure 1, for example, the teacher asks each student to imagine that it is a photo of him or her with a friend at a restaurant that they visited last night. Their task is to write a letter to the manager of the restaurant complaining about their dining experience.

Figure 1.

Although the situation is fairly structured, it affords students the flexibility of choosing three or four of the worst aspects of the situation and describing them at their own levels of proficiency. A beginning ESL student, for example, might include sentences such as "The food was cold. We saw a rat in the restaurant." A more advanced student, on the other hand, might write, "While we were eating, one of the cooks raced out of the kitchen chasing a rat."

### *4. Picture Completion*

Students working in pairs are each given two incomplete pictures, A and B.[3] Without showing each other their drawings, one student completes picture A and the other picture B. Next, each student writes a detailed description of the drawing and exchanges the description with his or her partner. After reading the partner's description, each student must try to complete the other unfinished picture according to the partner's description. Finally, the two drawings are compared. This activity gives students practice in writing descriptions and also reinforces the notion that writing must be done with a reader in mind. It emphasizes that descriptive writing must be accurate and sufficiently detailed to convey a clear image to the reader.

## Conclusion

What kinds of classroom activities are likely to build proficiency? It is obvious that the activities for all four skills include some common characteristics.

1. These activities will include relevant vocabulary.
2. The language and situations will be meaningful to the students.
3. There will be real communication.
4. The skills practiced will be those needed in the real world. (Strasheim [27] notes that when we conjugate verbs, we prepare students for a life in which they go out into the world and conjugate verbs.)
5. The activities will practice the skill being learned.

6. The activities will motivate students to learn the language: They will be short, fun or interesting, and have observable outcomes.

Few dispute the idea that students learn what they are taught. If students are taught to become proficient, they will become more proficient. Additionally, by providing a richer, more varied learning environment, students will have more positive and successful experiences in the language classroom. Building for proficiency implies that students will be not only more proficient in the language, but also in the communication skills that are becoming more and more necessary in our shrinking world. Proficiency in language provides proficiency in living.

### Notes

1. Omaggio lists the differences between spoken and written discourse (19, p. 123).
2. These activities were developed and presented at several conferences in collaboration with Linda Shinnock of Otterbein College, Westerville, Ohio.
3. Excellent sources for unfinished pictures are the *Anti-Coloring Books* (28).

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